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SMOKE SCREEN WORKED OUT BY AMBASSADOR

U.S. Thai-Flight Ban Seen as Political Ploy

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BANGKOK—The U.S. Air Force in Thailand has been having its troubles lately, so there was little surprise last week when the Bangkok authorities asked the Americans to stop reconnaissance flights over the Indian Ocean.

The question now arises as to who actually asked whom.

The government of Thailand had never before made a point of placing restrictions on American planes, which were, to say the least, fighting a major air war in Vietnam and Laos from Thai bases. Some American pilots from Thai bases are still getting combat pay for supply flights into Cambodia.

Authoritative informants now say the initiative to stop the Indian Ocean reconnaissance flights came from the Americans themselves.

The Thai announcement was a smoke screen worked out by U.S. Ambassador William Kintner, the West Point general turned scholar-diplomat, and Thai Foreign Minister Churuthan Issarangkun.

The evident design was to increase pressure on the U.S. Congress to approve almost \$30 million for the improvement of base facilities on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. The idea was that if any necessary reconnaissance flights could no longer be flown from Thailand, the base at Diego Garcia would become even more vital.

At any rate, after American prompting the Thais dutifully made their announcement, stating that American missions from Thailand were to be confined to those designed to enforce the Paris peace agreement of 1972 concerning Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The Thai government proceeded to get a little more mileage from the American-inspired announcement by implying—for restive domestic consumption—that Thai authorities intended to take a firmer look at the whole base situation from now on.

In fact, the government of Thailand has never given the Americans any real trouble over the bases and is unlikely to do so now, even though civilian Premier Sanya Thammasat, a former university rector, is more vulnerable to popular pressures than the previous military regime.

The present rate of withdrawal, which will see the U.S. presence down to 25

men by the end of this year, is delicately balanced to meet Thai domestic requirements and leave the United States with ample military punch in Southeast Asia.

Thailand's hawkish generals are temporarily out of power but not

without political clout. They find the American presence reassuring. Furthermore, the withdrawals under way are causing economic dislocations that the government can ill afford, despite the continuing pleas of some students.

The question is not so much whether the bases, built at an initial cost of \$650 million (U.S.), should remain. It revolves around what possible use they might be to both Thailand and the United States.

The interplay involving Indian Ocean reconnaissance flights indicates the bases can be used for political purposes or for purposes somewhat remote from Thailand's security, or American power in South Vietnam.

In fact, the bases are now being used for reconnaissance flights over Laos, probably by unmanned drone aircraft. The U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, asked about reconnaissance flights over the Indian Ocean, replied: "The U.S. is not currently flying surveillance flights over the Indian Ocean."

Asked about flights over Laos, the reply was: "We do not discuss the specifics of reconnaissance flights."

Given the nature of the Indochina war and the uncertain peace agreements so far concluded, it is almost unthinkable that the United States would soon forego intelligence-gathering flights of one sort or another.

However, the big question now is whether the Thai bases will ever again be used for major attacks on North Vietnam—or elsewhere.

The United States has privately told the South

of President Nguyen Van Thieu that such air support in the future is virtually ruled out, even in the event of a large-scale and open North Vietnamese offensive. Although this was done to impress upon Thieu that South Vietnam must be prepared to do all the fighting nowadays, the United States was careful not to close the door absolutely.

The rationale for the Thai bases is based on three premises:

—President Nixon has demonstrated in the past that he is willing to unilaterally order air strikes if he feels it necessary and Mr. Nixon remains the U.S. Commander in Chief.

—In the event of an enormous North Vietnamese offensive, the United States would present its case to Congress, which might change its mind and remove present restrictions on northern air strikes.

—In any event, U.S. air power in Thailand is a restraining influence on North Vietnam since Hanoi cannot rule out bombing raids and must plan accordingly. Furthermore, supply missions to Cambodia indicate the continued willingness of the United States to use its air power advantage in Indochina.

American officials decline to comment on further reductions in air power after the present schedule is completed by the end of the year.

By the end of the year, officials note, the U.S. Air Force in Thailand will remain a highly effective weapon. Of the 350 aircraft in the country, more than half will be combat jets.

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